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The Federal Role in Urban Wildlife

Effective public education is vital to meet the needs of both wildlife and the public.

by Kathleen A. Fagerstone, Ph.D.

Traditionally, federal agencies have not had a large role in the management of urban wildlife. However, between 1931 and the mid-1960s the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had an extensive urban animal damage control program designed to control vertebrate pests of stored food and to control animals that spread zoonotic diseases like rabies and tularemia. Prior to and during World War II, the animal damage control program began assisting local and state health agencies in combating rodent problems in slum areas of large, industrialized cities.

The "Urban Rat Control Act" of 1946 provided additional funds for increasing personnel and research. Local health department personnel were trained in environmental sanitation, building maintenance and rodent population reduction. The development of many commercial rodenticides, the use of "block clubs" and organized "rat campaigns," and the establishment of the Communicable Disease Center (CDC) in Atlanta were the result of animal damage control efforts.

After World War II, many of the tasks of the urban animal damage control personnel were gradually assumed by the private sector. During the middle 1960s, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began to deemphasize the urban portion of the animal damage control program in favor of the agricultural portion. In December 1985, the federal animal damage control programs were transferred to the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (U.S. Department of Agriculture), leading to further emphasis on agricultural involvement.

There has been renewed state and community interest in urban animal damage control problems because the nation's population has shifted from rural areas to primarily urban locations. Currently 75 percent of the U.S. population resides in metropolitan areas where much original wildlife habitat has been modified or eliminated. While populations of many wildlife species have declined, populations of other species have proliferated and become pests in urban areas. Conflicts have increased between urban wildlife and man. In many states over half the requests received by county extension agents for information on wildlife problems are from urban clientele.

Today, urban animal damage control programs at state and local community levels should consider at least four areas: training, information/education, product testing and research. Such programs should involve not just commensal rodents, but also commensal birds and other problem-causing wildlife, such as raccoons, skunks, bats, squirrels, prairie dogs and urban waterfowl. Wildlife problems include disease and health hazards, food storage and contamination, damage to structures and property, safety hazards, nuisance and competition with desirable wildlife species.

Initiation of urban animal damage control programs presents an exciting challenge because of the high visibility and sensitivity of urban wildlife. Effective pubic education is vital to meet the needs of both wildlife and the public. The objective of urban animal damage control programs should be to develop habitat for desirable wildlife populations while simultaneously managing those populations to reduce conflicts with man.

History of Federal Role in Urban Wildlife

1931—U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service establishes extensive urban animal damage control program.

1946—Urban Rat Control Act provides additional pest management funding.

Mid-1960s—U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service begins to favor agricultural portion of animal damage control over urban portion.

1985—Federal animal control programs are transferred to the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service.

1989—Renewed state and community interest in urban animal control problems.

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